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ABSTRACT

Most observers would agree that school superintendents in this country are under siege, as is the entire class of administrators in both the public and private sectors. Improved communication and transportation technology have increased public awareness and reaction to events. In addition, our society is increasingly organized into numerous special interest groups. Also, the consolidation of school districts into larger units has accentuated the problems caused by competing interest groups. The resulting conflicts create unstable political situations that affect both the public and private sectors. Public and private administration today are becoming increasingly complex. In addition, today's superintendents are often "outsiders" with no established support in the community, so replacement of a superintendent is relatively easy. The focus of destabilizing focus is not solely on the superintendent; however, the chief administrative position seems to be the most affected. In Parson's view, the position of superintendent lies at the interface between society's representatives and the educational organization. So whenever there is a gap between society and the organization, the superintendent receives the most stress. If this analysis is correct, superintendents will remain under siege as long as stressful situations exist. (Author/JG)

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SUPERINTENDENTS UNDER SIEGE - GET THE LEADER

Paper Prepared
for

ANNUAL CONVENTION - AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

by

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Most practicing administrators and observers of the educational scene in this country would agree that superintendents are under siege. Although valid and reliable data are not available about the number of superintendents who are fired, or who resign or who accept another position in lieu of being fired, certain indices might be used which would indicate that the actual involuntary turnover of superintendents is increasing. The first highly visible index was the rapid turnover in superintendents in big cities which began in the 1960's. This rapid turnover has been succeeded by what appears to be a progressive shortening of the length of employment of superintendents in the same school district.

There is a natural tendency to be myopic about the situation, that is to assume that school administrators are being subjected to types of pressures which are not exerted on executives outside of the realm of elementary and secondary education. A strong case can be made that superintendents constitute a subset of the entire class of managers and administrators who are under siege in both the public and private sector. Shortly after the rapid turnover pattern among big city superintendents began occurring the turnover pattern among college and university presidents became more noticeable. Initially, these turnovers were coincident with student unrest on the campuses. However, even after the period of widespread student unrest, the turnover pattern has continued and the average length of employment as president in a single institution has continued to be shortened. One might make the same observations about length of office among chief state school officers.

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The administrator or manager under siege phenomenon is not confined to the public sector. The February 1976 issue of Fortune Magazine (p. 28) contained the following observation:

A remarkable number of corporate presidents quit last month, indicating that the role of No. 2 may be getting harder--or less attractive. Several resignations reflected strong policy differences between the president and his boss.

The article then listed the names of presidents who recently resigned from such companies as International Paper Company, Pillsbury Company, Kaufman and Broad, Aetna Life and Casualty, and Lehman Brothers. The resignations of top officials at Gulf Oil Company and Lockheed are simply more dramatic instances of a much deeper and much broader phenomenon.

These observations lead me to state my first proposition that:

there are widespread conditions which become focused on the chief administrative officer of organizations of all types in the United States creating accentuated tensions and pressures on the chief administrator.

It will be perhaps useful to analyze some of the general conditions and some of the conditions more specific to school systems which account for the increasing instabilities experienced by top administrative officers. I regret that there is little empirical study of these conditions within the context of our topic. Therefore, the points that I will make are based primarily upon intuitive judgment.

Improved communication technology, particularly television--but also including increased use of telephones, has shortened the time span between the time of occurrence of an event and the time of awareness by individuals far distant from the scene. Not only does such technology increase and focus

awareness, it also, because of the shortened time span, evokes reactions by those away from the scene prior to a resolution of issues. In the pre-World War II era, issues were often resolved prior to widespread knowledge of the existence of such issues. Although all of us are conscious of the impact of television in dramatizing and accentuating issues, we often overlook the impact of the telephone "hotline" in "spreading the word" and in inviting support. In relatively isolated communities where there are few large issues, communication technology presents existing alternatives that might not have been identified. Different conditions can be more readily visualized by those on the local scene, conditions which might have been viewed previously as impossible, or conditions which could not have been visualized.

Improved transportation technology, when coupled with improved communication technology, facilitates the movement of people to a particular local scene for the purpose of actually participating in struggles over issues. Dramatic instances of this are the confrontations at the Democratic National Convention in the '60's, in the Kanawha county textbook controversy, the civil rights struggles of the 1960's, and the anti-Vietnam demonstrations.

A third phenomenon of contemporary society which has been facilitated in large part by improved communication and transportation technology is the growing organized nature of our society around special interests. We all are aware of anti-sex education groups, anti-bussing groups, pro-integration groups, teacher unions, etc.

Such a multiplicity of actively organized, and often militant groups, has resulted in a diminishing of the number of communities and states where there are dominant monopolistic power structures. Where there are emerging and two or three power centers, control tends to shift from time to time and election to election. Administrators selected by one power group tend to be rejected by the others. Particularly in large cities, power groups have

become so fractionated and so competitive that rational governance has become impossible. Similarly, in some school systems, power has been so dispersed that movement beyond the existing compromised status quo is extremely difficult if indeed possible.

The consolidation of school districts into larger and larger units has accentuated the problems created by growing competing special interest organizations and the diminution of power exercised by any one group. As attendance areas have become larger, differing populations have been included which have not developed a history of compromise and coordinated actions. The resulting conflicts create unstable political situations which affect both the public and the private sectors.

It is a mistake to assume that there once existed a broad American consensus which has recently been destroyed. It would seem more plausible to assume that from the colonial days to the present there has existed in American society widely divergent mutually exclusive political, philosophical and social values. What has changed is the growing organizational capability of those who were previously not in the dominant power sphere, the multiple handles on various levers of power, and the increasing sophistication in the use of available sanctions.

It is more widely understood today, that the schools have always been instruments of social policy. The conflict is, in fact, over which type of social policy should be utilized. Administrators who believe that the social policy aspect of schooling is a recent phenomenon should reexamine the history of schools in the light of previously legalized school segregation, or the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, or what happened in schools serving the children of the rich in a local unit and what happened to the children of the poor, or even the initial debates concerning the common school engaged in by Horace Mann.

Increased educational levels attained by the general population, rising expectations, pressures toward assessment and evaluation all add to the current debates about the schools.

A higher order of administrative skill is currently required than was true even in the 1960's. Administration and management in both the public and private sectors are becoming increasingly more complex. The plethora of Federal laws and regulations and the reporting requirements require an additional set of administrative skills. William Torrey Harris, the philosopher-superintendent, in spite of his intelligence and integrity, would be incapable of coping with the maze of current Federal regulations. School lunch regulations, Title IX, Title XX, and on and on. Even legislation which is stoutly defended by the educational establishment such as Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act has a history of contradictory and unclear regulations. Some administrators have been publically embarrassed and professionally injured by post hoc audits which conveniently forgot the lack of clarity in the early days of Title I administration.

Management of conflict among militantly competing groups impinging upon the schools is another additional aspect of the current administrator's job. Administrators often don't have the luxury of attempting to manage conflict which is distant and unrelated to the schools. Conflict often threatens the very existence of the school as an organization and the attempted use of students as pawns in a struggle for power. Under such conditions, there is no administrative role as an impartial arbitrator or mediator. Inevitably, the administrator becomes a party to the conflict; suffering the inevitable scars and wounds, victories and defeats.

Within this context of unstable political, economic, and social environments, the current day administrator suffers an additional disadvantage that many of his predecessors did not have. The cosmopolitan nature of current

administrators and the great mobility in changes of positions have resulted in a cost, that is the administrator "from the outside" does not have the advantage of kinships, life-long friendships and loyalty within the community and its groups. Given the current high turnover rate, there is little probability that the administrator can develop such ties. Hence, the administrator tends to a bureaucrat with little claim to position other than utility to the organization. When such utility is diminished, his replacement is a relatively easy process.

These observations about conditions operating currently in our society lead me to a second proposition that:

an unstable external environment inevitably tends to threaten the stability of conditions within the organization. If the external environment becomes too unstable for organizational maintenance efforts to cope with, then organizational disequilibrium results.

Thus far, the discussion has centered around organizational instability. What is needed, in addition, is an explanation of why such instability tends to focus on the chief administrative officer. There is evidence that the focus of forces leading toward instability is not solely upon the superintendent. In recent years, forced principal turnover has been on the increase; there has been also more rapid turnover of board members. However, the chief administrative position seems to be the most affected. There are several possible explanations for this. The superintendent of schools tends to be the most visible aspect of a school system. In short, the superintendent plays a symbolic role as well as a management role. Whether or not the superintendent is greatly influential in policy decisions, he or she is perceived to be influential. Being a single individual, the superintendent is an easy symbol

for accolade or disapproval. It is a rather more difficult psychological task to hold a group responsible for problems, such as a group of teachers or a group of principals, particularly when there is a greater frequency of contact with some members of those groups who are not perceived to be "bad." Furthermore, there is more available recourse to remedy in firing a chief administrative officer who is more vulnerable in terms of position. Imagine the difficulties which would be created if all or most teachers were fired, or all or most principals were dismissed in even a moderately sized school district. The logistical difficulties in such actions are compounded by tenure laws which exist in many states.

Talcott Parsons provided one analytical tool which can help in understanding the "superintendent under siege" phenomenon when he postulated that boards are really outside of an organization, that is, boards represent an institutional function; they represent society. Teachers and principals and assistant superintendents represent the organization. Teachers represent the technical aspects of an organization; principals and assistant superintendents the management aspects. In Parson's view the position of superintendent lies at the interface between society's representatives (the board) and the organization (represented by teachers, principals, and other administrators). If this view is correct, then whenever there is a gap between society and the organization, the most fragile point, that of the position of superintendent, receives the most stress.

These observations lead me to a third proposition that:

given the nature of organization, the natural point of stress is at the interstitial position between representatives of society and the organization itself. This position is held by the superintendent.

It is interesting to speculate about the effect on the organization if the concept of the administrative team takes firm root in actuality and if the practice of employing an entire team becomes more widespread. The organizational disruption when the entire top management is precipitously swept away is a cost to be weighed.

If the analysis in this discussion is valid, then superintendents will remain under siege as long as there exist conditions which create stressful situations. To reduce the intensity of the siege requires a reduction in the conflicting forces within the situation. The particulars in a situation obviously differ from community to community. However, the model of organized conflicting forces within the context of modern technology focussing upon the unique position of the chief administrative officer does offer one mode of explanation of the administrator under siege phenomenon.

I wish that I could project a reduction of stress in our society. Unfortunately, I see little basis for such a projection. It might be that a keystone of belief in America has to be modified. Perhaps there are no immediate satisfactory answers under some conditions and that a longer-range view toward changing basic conditions will have to be taken.